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SUBJECT: KURDISTAN REGIONAL GOVERNMENT PUK PRIME MINISTER PUSHES FOR
KIRKUK, AGAINST SPREAD OF POLITICAL ISLAM AND IRANIAN INFLUENCE

REF: Kirkuk 32

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CLASSIFIED BY: Scott Dean, Regional Coordinator (Acting), Reo
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. In separate meetings, leaders of the Patriotic United Kurdistan (PUK) demanded that the next Baghdad government tackle TAL 58 issues: "Kirkuk is a part of Kurdistan." The leaders reaffirmed the PUK's support for the U.S. presence in Iraq and their desire for continuing long-term cooperation with us, specifically asking for the establishment of a U.S. military base in Kurdistan. They also reaffirmed the PUK's ongoing efforts to discourage fundamentalism by developing civil society and democracy in the region, including through 120 Kurdish NGO's in Iran. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) The Deputy Political Counselor for Provincial Outreach (DEPPOLCOUNS), accompanied by RC(A) and IPAO, met separately on March 6 with leaders from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Sulaymaniyah, including Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Omar Fattah, PUK Politburo member Arsalan Baiz, the Director of the PUK's Democratic (READ: civil society) Organizations Bureau, Mala Bakhtiar, and KRG Relations and Cooperation Minister Jamal Aziz.

Sulaymaniyah Prime Minister Omar Fattah

¶3. (C) Kirkuk's Status. Sulaymaniyah Prime Minister Omar Fattah asserted that Kirkuk's future was an important point for the Kurds in the government formation negotiations in Baghdad. "Kirkuk is a part of Kurdistan," he said, adding that the KRG would "respect and provide freedom for all in Kirkuk, no matter their ethnicity." He asked the U.S. to help resolve Kirkuk's status in accordance with Iraq's constitution. DEPPOLCOUNS deferred to the Ambassador, who was well informed on the matter.

¶4. (C) Fattah allowed that Hawijah (an Arab district of Kirkuk province) would not have to join KRG. He later said a Kirkuk delegation had complained to him on March 5 that the Iraqi government was trying to hire only Arabs for jobs in Kirkuk province. He added that the Sunnis in southern Kirkuk province and northern Salah ad Din were attacking Kurds residing in those areas. DEPPOLCOUNS informed Fattah the Kirkuk PRT and the Kirkuk Provincial Council were looking for ways to reduce violence in Hawijah (septel), and asked for PUK political party support for such efforts (DEPPOLCOUNS made the same request to Arsalan Baiz).

¶5. (C) Hopes U.S. Will Stay. Fattah -- indeed, all of our

interlocutors that day -- said they hoped that the U.S. would stay involved with the KRG even after the U.S. military left and offered to host a permanent U.S. military base in Kurdistan.

¶ 6. (C) Fattah said the Kurds insisted on a national unity government in Baghdad. The Kurds had had a bad experience with PM Ja'afari: he did not stand by his commitments and was not ready to tackle major problems (READ: TAL 58). Fattah said he feared Ja'afari would establish an "Islamic republic," given his supporters. Moqtada Al-Sadr was the obstacle to an agreement between the Kurds and Shia to replace Ja'afari. Fattah accused the Iranians of working directly with Sadr and of pressuring the Shiites to keep Ja'afari.

¶ 7. (C) U.S. Companies Losing Out. Noting the absence of U.S. companies in the Kurdish region's oil industry, Fattah blamed the companies themselves. Fattah said some U.S. companies had signed formal agreements with the KRG, yet never implemented their projects. Despite this, Fattah stressed the KRG's strong desire to host U.S. companies.

PUK Politburo Member Arsalan Baiz

¶ 8. (C) Kurds as National Mediators. Arsalan Baiz, the PUK Politburo member responsible for PUK organizations and offices, laid out the PUK's support for the U.S. presence in Iraq and its hope for long-term cooperation with the U.S. He made the point that, by following the U.S., the Kurds had cut themselves off from other sources of support in the region. Baiz emphasized how the Kurds were committed to helping Iraq achieve peace and security. "If there is no security in Baghdad, the Kurds cannot live in peace." "We are charged with wanting independence, but we are the ones bringing Iraq together." The top priority was national government formation. He described the Kurds as national "mediators" not only among ethnic groups, but also between the Sunni and Shia. He also expressed dissatisfaction with the current national government, saying that, in the three years following liberation, it had made no serious attempts to

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resolve electricity and fuel problems.

¶ 9. (SBU) Media. Baiz said that the Kurdish region enjoyed a high level of freedom, as illustrated in the more than 150 newspapers published in Sulaymaniyah, 10 "free" TV stations and many radio stations. (COMMENT: He did not mention that practically all media outlets are dominated by a political party. END COMMENT.)

¶ 10. (SBU) Bio Note: Baiz said that, while he was a university student, the Iraqi Government had imprisoned him for four years; it had also killed his son and his nephew.

KRG Relations and Cooperation Minister Jamal Aziz

¶ 11. (C) Aziz said that the PUK and KDP were holding up unification awaiting government formation in Baghdad. (COMMENT: KDP's Falah Bakir, by contrast, links this to PUK internal disagreement (see reftel and septel). END COMMENT.)

¶ 12. (C) Aziz said the KRG had been in negotiations since November with a Canadian firm (NOTE: Press reports identify it as "Heritage Oil Corporation" END NOTE.) about an oil field near Khanaqin. They had spent \$8 million to date on surveys. Aziz explained that, under the constitution, most revenues from existing fields went to Baghdad, but the KRG could keep most revenues from new oil fields. He said that Chinese and Iranian companies had come early on to the KRG. UAE investors were in the Kurdish region, but not Kuwaitis.

PUK Democratic Organizations Bureau

¶13. (U) Mala Bakhtiar, Director of the PUK's Democratic Organizations Bureau, introduced the organization's leadership and activities. Representatives from departments overseeing NGO development, women/children's affairs, and the media attended. According to Bakhtiar, the PUK has over 83 organizations, including art groups, syndicates, unions, and media; over 500,000 members throughout Kurdistan; and a variety of media outlets, including a public library, 3 FM radio stations (in Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyah and Khanaqin), a website, a weekly newspaper (which had contacts with writer Salman Rushdie), and three magazines on civilization and civil society, Islam and fundamentalism, and literature, respectively.

¶14. Bakhtiar said the PUK had 70 organizations in Kirkuk province and the Kurds had 120 NGO's in Iran. The PUK's Youth Freedom Organization had 100,000 members throughout Iraq: 12,000 in Kirkuk province. He hoped more American NGO's would come to the Kurdish region. For the last 12 years, the PUK had sponsored an annual fall Kurdish cultural festival that included 170 performers.

¶15. (C) Fundamentalism. Bahktiar, a former Communist, stressed the need to fight extremism and Islamic fundamentalism because those forces undermined democracy. He thought we also needed to fight Moqtada al Sadr, who was in league with Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. "Only in Kurdistan," he said, "is fundamentalism unable to weaken democracy." Bakhtiar added that Kurdistan "can help neighboring countries enable democracy and fight fundamentalism."

¶16. (C) Bio Note: Bakhtiar recently survived two assassination attempts. His Communist past and anti-religious views shape his view of history. In a possible reference to the Holocaust, he said that, in Europe, 5 million had died due to "Christian fundamentalism" and, in a possible reference to John Brown's raid, he claimed that in the American Civil War, religious fundamentalists burned the White House.

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